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A shootout in a playground between migrant gangs which saw a five-year-old caught in the crossfire last month reveals why Sweden is turning its back on liberalism, writes SUE REID

By SUE REID FOR THE DAILY MAIL
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Under a bright street light, Kristian Lindmark sat with his hand outstretched, begging for krona from evening diners merrily leaving restaurants on Vasagatan, a smart avenue in **Sweden**'s capital, Stockholm.
Beside him, Kristian had a plastic bag containing his few possessions: a spare pair of socks, some clean boxer shorts and a half-empty pack of cigarettes.

When I bought him a coffee from a nearby five-star hotel last weekend, he clutched the polystyrene cup to keep his hands warm in the bitter autumn night.

'The government does not help Swedes in their own country,' he said in a matter-of-fact tone. 'Instead, they give state money and warm homes to foreign people who come to live here.'

Fifty-two-year-old Kristian — from Uppsala, a cathedral town 35 minutes by train from Stockholm — lost his job as a butcher after a divorce. He is homeless, like hundreds of his fellow countrymen also begging on the capital's streets.

Last Sunday, he cast his vote in a national election in this country, renowned worldwide for its generous welfare state, multiculturalism and wide-open door to refugees.

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- **Gun terror: A policeman and onlookers try to help a young mother hit by a stray bullet during the playground shooting in Eskilstuna last month**

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- **Two rival gangs, one from the town's Arby suburb, the other from a suburb a mile away, were involved and a five-year-old boy was hit by a bullet as he played with other children at seven in the evening**

Sweden's liberal dream was pioneered by the nation's Social Democratic movement, whose parties have topped national polls ever since the end of World War I.

But this latest election has seen a convulsive change. Swedish voters supported an alliance of four Right-wing parties — including one, named the Sweden Democrats, which stands accused of historical links to Neo-Nazism.

Final poll results showed on Thursday that the Right-wing bloc has now chosen the new prime minister, elbowing aside the ruling Social Democrats.

To the shock of liberals in Sweden and across the world, the voters backed tougher immigration controls, foreign criminal deportations and stiffer punishments for the rising number of young men who have been plaguing their once-peaceful country with shootings and drug-dealing.

'The violent crimes are getting worse,' says Torsten Elofsson, a former Swedish police chief and candidate for the Christian Democrats, a party in the new Right-wing alliance. 'These used to happen in Stockholm and other big cities such as Malmo and Gothenburg. Now they have spread to small towns everywhere.'

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- **Ebba Busch, leader of Sweden's Christian Democrats, addresses supporters during an election party in Stockholm**

In just a decade, Sweden has gone from having one of the lowest rates of fatal shootings in Europe to the highest, according to the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention. This year is on track to break records, with 44 gun deaths by mid-August, close to the highest annual tally of 47 in 2020.

It was against this troubling backdrop that the election, in which the anti-immigration Sweden Democrat party seized an astonishing one vote in five, took place.

Late last month, with electioneering under way, there was a shootout by masked youths at a children's playground in Eskilstuna, a pretty manufacturing town an hour-and-a-half's drive from Stockholm that is home to a Volvo car-parts factory.

Two rival gangs, one from the town's Arby suburb, the other from a suburb a mile away, were involved and a five-year-old boy was hit by a bullet as he played with other children at seven in the evening.

The boy — from a Syrian family with a flat in state-housing blocks overlooking the tree-lined playground — was terrified, hiding his head in his hands close to a climbing frame when the firing started, before he was wounded in the stomach.

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- **Ambulances at the scene where two people were injured in a shooting at Emporia Shopping Center in Malmo, Sweden**

A mother in her 20s was hit, too, as she sat with her four-year-old girl. She was from elsewhere in Sweden, visiting her Iraqi Kurd relatives in Arby, and ran for safety before collapsing on the grass, blood spreading over her blue jeans after she had been shot in the hip.

The crossfire between the gangs, standing on opposite sides of the playground, lasted for nearly three minutes. Bullets whizzed past tables where families were enjoying picnics, before the shooters melted away into the trees and escaped. A police investigation was continuing last week.

When the Mail visited the playground after the shooting, worried mothers showed us bloodstains still marking the ground near a children's roundabout.

A 38-year-old woman called Fatima, who has five girls and arrived in Sweden as a refugee from Somali-land 16 years ago, said: 'Some of the children were on the trampoline and had taken off their sandals. They ran away barefoot to escape the shots.'

Fatima, a care worker, is so afraid for her children that she plans to leave the housing block in Arby. 'It is more dangerous here than Somali-land. Soon, someone will die.'

Another resident, 45-year-old Parvena, of Iraqi Kurd origin, revealed that her handsome young son Ilyas, aged nine, was a few feet from a bullet that hit the ground. 'Children are frightened they will be shot if they play outside their own homes,' she said.

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- **Police and rescue services transfer a woman who has been seriously injured in a stabbing at the Almedalen political festival into an ambulance car, in Visby on the Swedish island of Gotland**

It is the third time this year that the rival gangs have staged shootouts at the playground. Ilyas, who has seen two of them, said in a small voice when we visited: 'It's scary to live here.'

Yet the mothers, and local politicians, say the playground gangsters came from the same communities of Iraqi Kurd, Somali, Afghan and Syrian refugees as theirs — families given sanctuary in Eskilstuna.

'They deal in drugs and make their money that way. They don't have jobs,' explained Parvena. 'Some are still pupils at the local school and we know their families' names.'

Few understand more about the spiraling youth violence in the town than Elin Harnby, principal at Eskilstuna Middle School, which takes pupils up to the age of 17 — 60 per cent of them with mothers who have Swedish as a second language.

She says that since the latest shootings, the younger children have asked her if they can have bullet-proof vests to wear to lessons. She told the Mail: 'We have boys leaving school who don't go on to further education. They drop out and turn away from our society into a life of criminality.'

Eskilstuna's mayor, Jimmy Jansson, is unsurprised. Even before the election results showed that Right-wing parties had won half the votes in his town, he warned that a tragedy was befalling Sweden.

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- **Police and rescue services give medical aid to a woman who has been seriously injured in a stabbing at the Almedalen political festival in Visby on the Swedish island of Gotland**

The 44-year-old, a leading light in the Social Democrats, said a 'pandemic' of shootings, rapes and drug-dealing by young men was sweeping the country. Of 8,200 people counted by Swedish police as criminal gang members last year, almost 15 per cent were under 18.

'I am working class but I didn't deal drugs or fire guns as a teenager,' he said. 'The youngsters shooting at the playground are in our local school right now. They have a double life, being criminals at night and pupils by day. They are chameleons.'

He insists that most were born in Sweden to migrant families given refuge years ago. Others arrived as children in 2015-16, he says, during the biggest migration wave into Europe since World War II.

Mr Jansson said his party once believed that Sweden's 'terrifically strong' welfare state — offering free education, housing, medical care and copious child benefits — could cope with any problems of incomers with ease.

'We didn't understand that some don't want to join our society; that they come here to live but not to work,' he explained. 'They are not interested in Sweden or its culture. We reach out to them but they don't want to be reached.'

This sorry state of affairs, he said, has angered ordinary Swedes, who believe their generosity to immigrants has been hurled back in their faces.

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- **Emergency services attend the scene at a school in Malmo, Sweden in March**

Before the election, Mr Jansson was called a racist by Left-wingers because, unusually among his party's politicians, he argued for a halt in immigration, saying Sweden should not pour petrol on a burning fire.

He insists that family benefits should also be cut so migrant families are encouraged to have fewer children — the current system gives an extra monthly sum for each new baby. And he supports 'harsher' punishments for possessing a gun.

In Sweden's lax youth penal system, a convicted murderer aged under 18 serves just two or three years in a reform establishment. Mr Jansson said: 'It could be too late to save Sweden if nothing is done now.'

In a way, Sweden has cooked its own goose. During the migration crisis seven years ago, when a million refugees came to Europe from Syria, elsewhere in the Middle East and Africa, at least 163,000 were welcomed here, despite the country's comparatively small population, which was then 9.5 million.

Sweden believed the bulk of the newcomers were Syrians fleeing war — but many turned out to be Afghans, Iraqis, Iranians and Africans pretending to be genuine asylum-seekers. At that time, if you put 'asylum' in Arabic into an internet search engine, 'Sweden' came out as the top result.

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- **Police forensics members work at the site where according to local media Swedish rapper Einar was reportedly shot dead in the street in late October last year**

The country was such a popular destination that it became the fastest-growing EU nation, accepting one in seven of all arrivals (more per-capita than any other member state).

The result was a brutally damaging culture clash. Many of the incomers found it difficult to settle happily in the ultra-liberal Western society they had come to join.

There were other serious consequences, too. Only this week, a Twitter feed detailed a rape epidemic (against women and men) in Sweden.

It re-published data from Swedish National TV, later reported by the BBC, showing that 58 per cent of men convicted of rape and attempted rape over the five years to 2018 were born abroad.

The Swedish broadcaster, which counted all court convictions, revealed that in cases where the victim did not know the attacker, the proportion of foreign-born offenders was 85 per cent.

The findings were in line with more recent Swedish studies and others from Switzerland, Norway, Finland and Denmark.

Among the most worrying results of the Swedish research, the TV program added, was that other than Swedes, Afghans were the most common nationality among the convicted rapists, numbering 45 out of 843 people.

The program's editor did note, however, that the total number of reported rapes in Sweden, as opposed to court convictions, was a far higher figure, so no final conclusions could be drawn on immigrant involvement in sexual attacks.

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- **Police stands guard outside of Emporia Shopping Center in Malmo, Sweden**

A former police officer from Afghanistan, helping young Afghans to settle in Sweden, told the program that the attitudes of some of youngsters towards sexual equality differed significantly from views in their adopted country.

The Twitter feed included a shocking video allegedly posted recently by a 24-year-old migrant living in Sweden on his Instagram account. It shows him punching a seemingly unsuspecting girl, with overlayed text referring to her as a 'whore'.

In another video in the feed, a man says to the camera: 'We Arabs are here to take over your f****** country, you Swedish whore.' Two weeks after this video was recorded, the man was arrested on suspicion of raping another woman, the Twitter feed claims.

The fact is, Sweden was so overwhelmed by sheer numbers that it had little time to check the identities or backgrounds of migrants during the first wave of arrivals in 2015- 16.

Council flats in towns such as Eskilstuna, already hosting refugees, were allocated to the newcomers. They were encouraged to live together in the same areas in a gesture of kindness (and, many now say, huge naivety) by Swedish policymakers.

This had a doubly negative effect. First, native Swedes became disgruntled — and some remained homeless, as migrants were pushed ahead in the state housing queue. And second, the areas where migrants settled became ghetto-ised, full of predominantly Arabic speakers who often viewed police as the enemy and ignored local laws, such as the compulsory wearing of cycle helmets and street-smoking bans, as crime rates soared.

Now Sweden's liberal political elite face uncomfortable questions from the nation's own citizens about the kind of society it has become, and will be in future.

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- **A police vehicle is parked outside an apartment block in north-western Stockholm after two children was found seriously injured next to it, in November 2021**

According to the independent Pew Research Centre in the U.S., by 2050, Muslims could make up a third of the Swedish population if migration remains at previous high levels, alongside a fall in the birth rate among native Swedes.

In February this year, a controversial imam, Basem Mahmoud, based in an immigrant enclave of Malmo, claimed Muslims would soon take over Sweden.

The imam, who has called Jewish people 'the offspring of pigs and apes', saying he was quoting Islam's Koran, proclaimed in a recorded speech: 'Sweden is ours in ten or 15 years, whether they (Swedes) like it or not'.

It was a brave senior police officer called Peter Springare who a few years ago first publicly exposed the immigrant crime wave dogging Sweden which has led to this week's political swing to the Right.

In an online posting, he wrote of his working week: 'This is what I've handled between Monday and Friday; rape, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, rape-assault and rape, extortion, blackmail, assault, violence against police, threats to police, drug crime, drug crime, felony, attempted murder, rape again, extortion again and ill-treatment . . .

'Countries representing the crimes this week: Iraq, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Somalia, Syria again, Somalia . . .'

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- **Swedish Prime Minister and leader of the Social Democrats Magdalena Andersson, Ulf Kristersson, leader of the Moderate Party in Sweden and Jimmie Akesson, leader of the Sweden Democrats party in Sweden are pictured in a studio prior to a debate with other party leaders**

Inevitably, the police officer was hauled before Swedish officials for committing a hate crime. In the end, after public protests supporting him, no action was taken.

It was revelations such as his that pushed Mikael Stromberg into politics. A would-be MP and official of Eskilstuna's Sweden Democrats, he told us before the election: 'Everything must change' to save Sweden from 'disaster'.

'We have shootings at the weekend, the weekdays, all day and night time, outside schools, children's nurseries and in playgrounds. Every tenth shooting in Sweden — whether it kills or not — happens in Eskilstuna.

'Sweden is today the most dangerous country in Europe. And Eskilstuna is the most dangerous place in Sweden.'

He used to be an international technical consultant but gave up his career to enter politics. 'I thought, I won't be able to look my son in the eye when he is 15 if I do nothing to help Sweden.'

The 42-year-old, his wife and two children, aged four and six, used to live in an apartment in a pink-painted block just a stroll away from Eskilstuna's main square.

'We couldn't stay,' he says. 'There were too many shootings and even rapes right here in town. I was afraid for my children and their future.'

Also worried about the future is Kristian, the Swede begging for coins in central Stockholm.

His vote last weekend, unsurprisingly, went to the Sweden Democrats because he believes the party will bring help to ordinary Swedes like himself.

It is clear many others in this well-meaning but now beleaguered nation feel the same way.